What is the Epic Theater? | Walter Benjamin

Walter Benjamin’s critical thinking largely dealt with the question of theater: from “The Origin of German Tragic Drama,” through essays on avant-garde theater, to essays on toy shops, dolls, and children’s games, Benjamin’s writings express a deep interest in the phenomenology of the theater and theatrical performance. Benjamin was associated with the Frankfurt School, which operated mainly during the 1920s, and had as its members a group of German intellectuals of Jewish origin (such as Adorno, Horkheimer and Marcuse) who strived to develop a cultural criticism based on Marxist foundations (which in time, was coined Neo-Marxism). However, it is difficult to simply position Benjamin within the Neo-Marxist school, especially given his firm association with other areas of thought, such as theology, Kabbalah and messianism. Part of the essays he wrote were in fact rejected by members of the Frankfurt School because they did not express Marxist principles in a significant and bold enough manner. Members of the school offered various criticisms of Benjamin’s writing, including responses to his naïve view of the proletariat’s independent power, particularly in the context of his discussion on the cinematic experience. Benjamin’s expectations that the collective experience of the film audience will lead to an understanding regarding the power of the masses to generate revolution were, in the opinion of school members, unrealistic. In hindsight, today, one can say that Benjamin did not only foresee how film would become a subversive force in the cultural space, but also a legitimizing force that exploits the collective experience to sustain the status quo.

Benjamin was born in Germany in 1892 to an affluent, assimilated Jewish family. In 1921, he began studying philosophy and literature at Freighberg University. Still, most of his ideas developed outside the academic world. He dealt with translation from French to German (of Proust and Baudelaire), and wrote on a wide range of topics: German tragic drama, the concept of history, language and translation, the essence of cinema; he wrote about authors and poets (Kafka, Baudelaire, Proust, Leskov, etc.) and about storytelling. In addition to his astounding expertise in European art and culture, he was strongly influenced by Jewish messianic and Kabbalistic thought. In 1915, Benjamin moved to Munich where he met Kabbalah scholar Gershom Sholem (who taught for many years at Hebrew University in Jerusalem). The interaction with Shalom deeply influenced Benjamin’s thought, and a strong friendship developed between the two. When Sholem immigrated to Israel in 1923, the two maintained their relationship through an extensive and stimulating sharing of letters. Sholem suggested that Benjamin settle in Israel as well, and tried to persuade him by offering to secure a job for him at Hebrew University, but Benjamin refused. Benjamin completed his doctoral thesis—on the symbol in Romanticism—with highest honors. In 1925, he submitted his conferment thesis on The Origin of German Tragic Drama (to obtain a position at Frankfurt University), however it was rejected due to its enigmatic, unconventional and lyrical style. With the rise of the Nazis to power, Benjamin’s financial situation worsened and he left Berlin permanently in favor of exile in Paris. Following Germany’s invasion of Poland, Benjamin lost his German citizenship and was sent, together with other German émigrés, from Paris to a labor camp in France. He was released, finally, thanks to the interference of a French diplomat, but could not acquire an exit permit from France, and joined a group of friends who planned to escape through the Spanish border. Upon failing to cross the border, and fearing what lay ahead, Benjamin committed suicide by an overdose of morphine; he was only forty-years-old. The following day, the members of the group did manage to cross the border to Spain. Benjamin gained popularity and acclaim posthumously in the 1950s when Adorno published his writings.

Benjamin is a fervent critic of the modern age and of ideas aligned with modernity and the enlightenment project. In the framework of the enlightenment project, history was perceived as a linear sequence of events, which moves forward toward a better future. But Benjamin views the myth of progress sanctified by modernity in a completely different light: he perceives history as an unstoppable process of destruction. He does not see progress as a positive force that leads humanity toward a better future, but rather as an ongoing process of ruin and degeneration. An insigthful example of this appears in “Theses on the Philosophy of History” (1940), an essay in which Benjamin observes Paul Klee’s painting *Angelus Novus*, and argues that indeed, this is how the angel of history looks; this is an angel who sees the chain of historical events as an amalgamation of ruins and disasters, not as a causative linear sequence that connects past, present, and future. One can say that Benjamin’s pessimistic attitude toward history is caused by the historical context in which he is writing—Benjamin is criticizing modernity from a position of rupture and crisis. Most of his writings were written after World War I, and several during World War II. One can see how the crisis and violence-ridden humanity of this period influenced Benjamin’s thought considerably—he is writing while faced by a sinking Europe. One of the problems troubling Benjamin is that modernity, which strives toward progress and the ‘new,’ consistently denies and renounces the past. Therefore, for Benjamin, modernity embodies the loss of both tradition and a connection to the past. This loss, as Benjamin describes in “The Storyteller” (1936), causes the loss of the ability to pass on human experience (die Erfahrung) from generation to generation, from man to man, and share it with others. The visions of horror of World War I, the war of the trenches that completely changed Europe, rendered the human experience silent. But, according to Benjamin, the loss of the ability to transmit the experience, is not only the result of World War I, but also of modern existence in its entirety. Modern and capitalist phenomena, such as accelerated urbanization and industrialization, deepen the rifts between human beings and create an alienated environment that lacks an affinity for tradition. In such an environment, it is impossible to create critical consciousness, shared experiences or experiences of collective value. The modern experience and its underpinnings of alienation, detachment and mechanicalness, prevents man from experiencing his existence on a single linear sequence extending between the past and the present—sequence being the quintessential condition for tradition’s existence and for the communication of experience. Therefore, throughout his deliberations, Benjamin deals with the attempt to achieve a renewed approach to tradition past and the past. If progress is like a train speeding toward the future, Benjamin suggests not to submit to its rapid pace; he argues that at every moment we can look behind and utilize the past and render it relevant in the present. Obviously, this motion occurs in consciousness and is primarily associated with the way history is told, with the way one takes what occurred in the past and harnesses it to the present. Things that are part of the past can impact the present, and therefore, Benjamin implores us to develop an attentive ear toward tradition, myths, and the past because it is there that we can find the reform we all need.

Benjamin’s interest in Bertolt Brecht’s epic theater constitutes part of a broader attempt to typify the artistic forms that characterize modernity, capitalism, the emergence of the bourgeois, and technological development. In another essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1936), Benjamin’s description of film, which at the time was a new artistic form, is underlined by a utopic belief in the medium as a liberating artistic form that combines entertainment and criticism. This combination engenders democratization, which in turn, renders the art form accessible to all levels of society. In “The Storyteller,” Benjamin writes (in a less optimistic vein) that storytelling—the old artistic form we lost—embodies revolutionary, collective, and experience-preserving characteristics. As one can see, Benjamin’s thought is distinguished by a constant tension between the experience of losing the past, and his ability to describe the advantages of progress.

Benjamin viewed the theater as a medium of cultural criticism and a space of political thought. The essay “What is the Epic Theater” was written in the spring of 1939 and was published in the summer of that year in Switzerland in the journal *Mass and Wert*. The essay summarizes Benjamin’s studies of Brecht’s work (studies that began ten years before, at the end of the 1920s), and discusses major dramaturgical figures— ‘gesture,’ ‘defamiliarization,’ and ‘the untragic hero.’ Benjamin views theater as a medium with revolutionary qualities. For him, the ‘right’ literary, artistic, and theatrical tendencies are that which strive toward extreme syntactical change, and toward the deconstruction of art’s systems of representation, production, and consumption. The epic theater, Benjamin explains, is not satisfied with aesthetic innovations, but rather *actually* interferes in material life and changes both the actors’ and audience’s consciousness. For Benjamin, the epic theater constitutes an artistic endeavor with social implications: in the theater, both actor and spectator learn about states of alienation in the real-world and see how the very foundations of their life patterns have been distorted. Benjamin’s essay is predicated on the assumption that theatrical performance can create revolutionary political consciousness, and the epic theater perceives itself as committed to a radical change of the status quo.

Benjamin discusses the fundamentals of epic theater’s language, and emphasizes that its political-revolutionary agency is not necessarily marked only in its content—in the play’s textual messages—but rather largely in the text’s syntax and in the system of performative signs (what Benjamin is interested in is not what the play has to say, but how it is said). As Benjamin demonstrates, Brecht attempted to revolutionize theatrical language. He did so, first and foremost, by liberating the drama from the classical, Aristotelian definitions internalized by the theatrical world of the modern age. The epic theater is no longer concerned with ‘fear and trembling’ effects and in generating amongst the audience a sense of identification with the actors on stage. These effects have degenerated and are currently employed in the bourgeois theater to camouflage social injustices and to weaken the spectator’s critical thought. Benjamin describes the characteristics of the epic theater hero—the untragic hero. In Brecht, the hero is a type of anti-hero: the ‘fool,’ whose wisdom is ironic, and whose sufferings are not related to super-human dignity, but rather to crude, innate material needs. In other essays, Benjamin also identifies the image of the fool in Kafka: this is a character who always manages to be outside of the world of modern law, that is, outside the environs of the normative bourgeoisie. He argues that this is a character who embodies a real hope for redemption because the sense of guilt or the burden of ancestral judgement does not apply to him (this points to Deleuze and Guattari’s discussion on de-territorialization and de-Oedipalization regarding Gregor Samsa in *Metamorphosis*). Knowledge, Benjamin notes, always involves guilt; that is, the moment of expulsion from the Garden of Eden. Hence, who is one who knows?—tragic characters, such as Oedipus who discovers the truth about his origins. But Brecht’s non-tragic hero seems to relinquish Oedipus’s knowledge: the fool is the one who does not know, and since a lack of knowledge marks some modus of guilt-free existence, it is the fool, Benjamin explains, who has a chance to achieve genuine redemption.

The epic theater deconstructs the theater’s classical, Aristotelian language. It does so, firstly, by employing various means to interrupt the plot such as, songs performed at the height of the drama, sudden entrances and exits of minor characters, the waving of placards and captions, etc. All these create disruption and gaps in the performative sequence. Benjamin provides an example: [quote]

Presented with this type of staged circumstance, the spectator experiences distance and alienation; he does not understand what is happening on stage and does not empathize with the heroes’ stories. Brecht’s play is therefore a political play that presents the irrationality of the political order by way of defamiliarization (and in the example quoted, we witness defamiliarization regarding the *petit-bourgeoise* and the norms of the middle-class home, but also regarding orders of time and language. All this generates a significant misconception vis-à-vis the theatrical genre in general).

The defamiliarization (Verfremdung) created in the epic theater prevents spectators from sinking into the artistic illusion. In turn, they become reflexive—they assume a critical gaze that is the prerequisite for the appearance of revolutionary consciousness and a pragmatic understanding of material reality. In Brecht’s words, from his essay “Theater for Pleasure or Theater for Instruction”: [quote].

Defamiliarization in epic theater is not only thematic, it is also semiotic. In Brecht’s epic theater, one language is presented as contrasting another—the language of the body operates in contrast to spoken language: for instance, when a character in *Mother Courage and her Children* suddenly begins to sing a song that is incompatible with what has taken place so far on stage; or an instance in which actors make exaggerated gestures during a calm, genteel conversation; or when simple, vulgar, bestial gestures accompany a speech full of pathos. Body language, in such cases, fosters fragmentation—a gap between what is being said and what is taking place—and muddles the obvious. In such a performative moment, Benjamin says, the actor, in a sense, quotes himself; he generates in the spectators the consciousness or awareness of the fact that he is merely an actor playing a role to avoid activating the mechanism of empathy in the spectator. This is exactly what Brecht hoped to achieve: to present the spectator with an ambiguous world, so much so that the spectator will want to stop everything so that he does not become captivated by what is being presented before him.

In this context, Benjamin refers to the issue of gesture (Die Geste). This is not just any gesture, but rather the quotable gesture, and it deeply concerns Benjamin in his essays on Kafka and Karl Kraus as well. Benjamin demonstrates that literature—as in Kafka’s case—and theater—as in Brecht’s case—liberate things from their banal, degenerated routine by taking them out of their primary context and situating them in a new one. The ‘gesture’ is not meant to supplement or accentuate speech; rather to contradict it and create de-contextualization. In other words, the gesture constitutes a quote taken out of context. Gestures in Brecht’s epic theater are always taken out of context and facilitate the constant shifting of signifiers (this reminds one of Derrida’s term *différance* and the way in which Derrida criticizes Austin for attempting to give things significance by fixing them in a particular context that creates compatibility between the context and speech). In his essay on Kafka’s *Amerika*, Benjamin reads the text’s final ‘fragment’ as dramaturgical prose, as literature whose essence is gestural. It is interesting to note how the written text, not only the theatrical performance, can produce these types of gestures, and one wonders whether the idea of the gesture is unique to the theatrical medium or is a principle characteristic of any sign system. Benjamin writes of the gesture that it is “the mother of all dialectics” because it contains the most fundamental and profound conflict, and the most severely antagonistic attitude: the invalidation and negation of what is happening. The staged event itself is unraveled by the gesture: this is the place in which the narrative falls apart, in which the theater’s fourth wall collapses; this is a moment of meaning’s disentanglement; and therefore, this is a moment of heightened criticism in which the spectator’s eyes are opened. According to Benjamin, the gesture’s deconstructionism, which takes things out of context and collapses the conventional meanings of things invites a moment of revelation. Benjamin develops this idea in his essay on Kafka and explains that redemption and revelation are in fact the other, positive, side of the gesture. Although the gesture deconstructs linkages and destroys meaning, at the same time, it fosters affinity; it deconstructs text, language and expressions, but also creates a sense of shared destiny, of being part of a community, and of revolutionary collectivity.